



Short report

Alias: Lying to the police and pathological criminal behavior



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ABSTRACT

The use of aliases has been shown to be associated with antisocial behavior, but the empirical research on this topic is modest. The current study employs a multiple analytical approach to explore the association between aliases and career criminality in two large samples of adult offenders. We hypothesized that the use of aliases would not only be strongly associated with arrest history but this singular behavior would accurately classify a large proportion of habitual criminals. Results show that alias usage is robustly associated with career arrests net the effects of arrest onset, age, and sex in negative binomial regression models and was an excellent classifier ($AUC = .82$) of habitual criminality. Implications of the findings for forensic and criminal justice practitioners are offered.

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1. Introduction

Aliases, alternative names that criminal defendants employ to avoid detection, are relatively common features in law enforcement and criminal justice practice. Often, aliases reflect mistakes or other inaccuracies that arise during police contacts, such as transposing letters when spelling a defendant's name, mishearing the correct spelling of an offender's name, or other errors that arise from language barriers between defendant and police. The intoxication level of the defendant also increases the likelihood of misidentification at arrest and the resultant errors can appear as an alias on an offender's official record contained in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). Most aliases are actually slightly different spellings of the defendant's true name.^{1–3}

In addition to these mostly innocuous circumstantial errors, aliases also can represent important and troubling indicators of an offender's antisociality. For example, psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by affective, antisocial/behavioral, lifestyle, and interpersonal deficits that are significantly associated with

antisocial behavior. The interpersonal dimension is characterized by indicators such as pathological lying, conning or manipulation, glibness, and grandiose self-worth.⁴ Alias usage is clearly compatible with the first three indicators of the interpersonal dimension. In her seminal study of the development of psychopathic (in her study, sociopathic) personality, Robins noted that psychopaths were readily identifiable by their use of aliases and other impulsive, irresponsible forms of conduct.⁵ A variety of other investigators have similarly shown that alias use is more common among psychopathic than non-psychopathic offenders.^{6–8}

The use of aliases is also a figure in psychiatric diagnoses. Deceitfulness as evidenced by repeating lying, use of aliases, or conning others is part of the diagnostic criteria for Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) as contained in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition (DSM-IV-TR).⁹ From this theoretical vantage, the use of aliases is indicative of broader psychopathology and considerable behavioral risk.

The empirical literature on criminal aliases is surprisingly episodic. There are widely varying estimates of the prevalence of criminal alias usage that are perhaps a function of the antisociality of the sample. For instance, Glueck's seminal examination of serious criminal offenders found that aliases were commonly used by delinquents with extensive criminal careers.¹⁰ Three decades later, in a

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study of 60 rural male prisoners, Clinard found that less than 2 percent of prisoners in his sample used aliases during their criminal careers.¹¹ Myers and Levy examined inmate misconduct careers and found a relatively small group of inmates who chronically violated prison rules and engaged in criminal misconduct during confinement. One of the distinguishing features of these “intractable” inmates was extensive use of aliases in their prior criminal history.¹²

In a study of over 200 male prisoners, Harry found that 31 percent of offenders used aliases.¹³ DeLisi's investigation of aliases as a potential marker of low self-control reported a prevalence of 18 percent among a sample of 500 adult arrestees.¹⁴ His study suggested that lying to the police to avoid detection is an impulsive, short-sighted, mostly futile effort to confuse police that is consistent with global deficits in self-control/self-regulation.¹⁵ In a study of more than 400 patients at a high-security psychiatric hospital, Völlm and colleagues reported that 17 percent of the sample employed aliases.⁸ In perhaps the most comprehensive empirical examination to date, Vaughn, DeLisi, Gunter, Fu, Beaver, Perron, and Howard examined externalizing behaviors among more than 43,000 participants in the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), the largest epidemiological survey of the United States.¹⁶ Of the 34 externalizing behaviors in their study, the use of aliases was the most uncommon form of antisocial behavior with overall prevalence near zero. However, among the most severely antisocial group in the NESARC, the prevalence of use of aliases was about 20-fold higher.

In totality, using aliases is associated with higher psychopathology, including greater arrest chronicity,¹³ transiency,¹⁷ greater psychiatric and/or substance abuse history,^{5,8,13} and overall worse criminal careers.^{5,7,8,18,19} Despite the equivocal findings about the prevalence of criminal aliases in forensic and criminological research, aliases are viewed by criminal justice practitioners as a widespread problem in criminal justice practice.^{2,12,20}

2. Current focus

To date, the empirical study of criminal aliases is spotty and does not provide appropriate substantiation to the conceptual importance of aliases found in psychopathy theory and ASPD diagnoses. To redress this, the current study employs a multiple analytical approach to explore the association between aliases and career criminality in two large samples of adult offenders. We hypothesize that the use of aliases will not only be strongly associated with arrest history but this singular behavior will accurately classify a large proportion of habitual criminals.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Samples, data, and participants

Data are derived from interviews between pretrial services officers or bond commissioners and arrestees at a large, adult, urban jail located in the western United States. In this jurisdiction, bond commissioners served as judicial officers and worked in conjunction with sheriff deputies within the county jail. Their function was to interview all criminal defendants brought to the jail and to obtain employment, residency, and criminal history for setting bond. Bond commissioners had the authority to release eligible defendants on recognizance bonds. This work experience permitted constant access (the bond commissioner unit was staffed around the clock) to all arrestees who were brought to the jail during this period.

In this jurisdiction, the bond commissioner unit conducted a pilot study to identify the most recidivistic offenders to determine their eligibility for various social service policies (e.g., a program designed to meet the needs of indigent, transient offenders) and

prosecutorial efforts (e.g., selective prosecution using habitual offender statutes). Approximately 50 offenders comprised the original “frequent offender” roster, and their criminal histories contained an average of thirty arrest charges. Based on this selection criterion, any offender whose record contained thirty arrest charges was classified as a frequent offender upon approval from the chief district judge and district attorney's office. Frequent offenders, because of their habitual criminal conduct, were precluded from receiving personal recognizance bonds. From 1995 to 2000, the bond commissioner unit processed 25,640 defendants, 500 of whom (less than 2 percent) qualified for frequent/habitual offender status. These 500 offenders were, in effect, the population of a 6-year census of official criminal offenders processed in this jurisdiction. Importantly, although the offenders were processed at one facility, their criminal activity can and did occur in multiple jurisdictions. During the same time period, a simple random sample of 500 arrestees was also selected from the same sampling frame. This permitted comparison of normative and pathological types of criminal offenders.

During bond interviews that were legal proceedings conducted under oath, defendants self-reported their criminal history, including all police contacts, arrests, court actions, and sentences. Self-reports can yield arrests and other criminal activities that do not appear on official records, arguably rendering them a more accurate reflection of an individual's true criminal past. The self-report method is problematic with career criminals, however.²¹ The most serious career criminals have offending careers that include potentially hundreds of arrests, convictions, and various punishments. Their careers often span decades and chronicles events when defendants were frequently intoxicated on alcohol and other illicit substances. For these and other reasons, such as memory errors, outright deception, and the difficulty recalling hundreds of legal outcomes, the validity and internal consistency of self-reports from the worst offenders may be the least reliable.^{22,23}

As a result, self-reported criminal histories were supplemented with official records from the Interstate Identification Index (III) system. Under the III system, the FBI maintains an automated criminal record containing an FBI number and state identification number (SID) for each state holding criminal history information on an individual. The III records are accessed using the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) telecommunications lines that retrieve criminal records from computerized repositories based on offender fingerprints and other biographical data.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Independent variables

Sex (female = 0; male = 1), age (continuously coded), and arrest onset (continuously coded) were used as predictor variables given their strong association with criminal activity over the life course.^{24–26} Aliases were measured continuously as the official number of alternative names listed on the offender's NCIC record. In the random sample, descriptive statistics for the independent variables were: aliases ($M = .88$, $SD = 2.45$, $\text{Range} = 0–23$), sex (73 percent male, 27 percent female), age ($M = 33.28$, $SD = 10.08$, $\text{Range} = 18–72$), and arrest onset ($M = 26.32$, $SD = 9.73$, $\text{Range} = 10–70$). For the habitual sample, descriptive statistics for the independent variables were: aliases ($M = 7.71$, $SD = 9.14$, $\text{Range} = 0–55$), sex (89 percent male, 11 percent female), age ($M = 39.61$, $SD = 10.74$, $\text{Range} = 18–74$), and arrest onset ($M = 18.64$, $SD = 5.35$, $\text{Range} = 8–57$).

3.2.2. Dependent variables

Total career arrests serves as the dependent variable. Descriptive statistics for total arrests for the random sample are ($M = 6.40$,

SD = 9.00, Range = 1–72) and for the habitual sample are ($M = 59.76$, SD = 30.64, Range = 30–267). In the Receiver operating characteristics – area under the curve (ROC-AUC) model, a dichotomous term for habitual offender status (no = 0, yes = 1) was used.

3.3. Analytical strategy

ROC curves plot the sensitivity (true positives) versus 1-specificity (false positives) and the greater AUC, the stronger the predictive validity of the covariate. In other words, ROC-AUC analysis is a useful visual way to see the classification accuracy of an independent variable on a binary outcome/dependent variable. Here, aliases is the independent variable and habitual offender status is the outcome variable.

In the multivariate models, total career arrests serve as the dependent variable. Arrests are count data that are bound by zero, positively skewed, and overdispersed where the variance exceeds the mean.²⁷ Overdispersion is a common feature of outcome data that capture high frequency counts, such as the arrest activity of serious criminal offenders. Using STATA 11, preliminary Poisson regression models were examined with diagnostics to test for overdispersion and it was detected (goodness of fit $\chi^2 = 5255.743$, $p < .0000$ for habitual sample and goodness of fit $\chi^2 = 2309.415$, $p < .0000$ for random sample). As a result, multivariate models were estimated with negative binomial regression to accommodate the increased variance caused by overdispersion.²⁸

4. Results

4.1. Prevalence of aliases by sample

Fig. 1a and b clearly shows prevalence differences between the random and habitual sample of offenders. Among the 500 randomly selected offenders, 81.6 percent ($n = 408$) had zero aliases on their criminal record and the mean alias use was low ($M = .88$, SD = 2.45, Range = 0–23). Among the 500 habitual offenders, 24.8 percent ($n = 124$) had zero aliases on their criminal record and the mean alias use was high ($M = 7.71$, SD = 9.14, Range = 0–55). This difference was significant, $t(1000) = 16.13$, $p < .0001$.

4.2. Aliases as a classification for habitual criminality

The next stage of the analysis explores aliases as a classification indicator for habitual criminality using a ROC-AUC model. As shown in Fig. 2, aliases is an excellent classification variable for habitual criminality status (AUC = .82, SE = .01, 95% CI = .79–84). Receiver operating characteristics (ROC) curves plot the sensitivity (true positives) versus 1-specificity (false positives) and the greater area under the curve (AUC), the stronger the predictive validity of the covariate.²⁹ Values of 1.0 represents perfect positive predictive validity, values of .50 represents chance predictive validity, and values of .00 represents perfect negative predictive validity. Thus, the AUC for aliases is excellent.

4.3. Multivariate models of career arrests

Tables 1 and 2 display negative binomial regression coefficients where career arrests were the dependent variable and aliases, arrest onset, sex, and age were predictors. The effect of aliases is comparable across samples with z-scores of approximately eight standard deviation units. Indeed, in both models the effects of aliases are larger than those of sex (with males more likely to accumulate arrests) and age (with older offenders more likely to

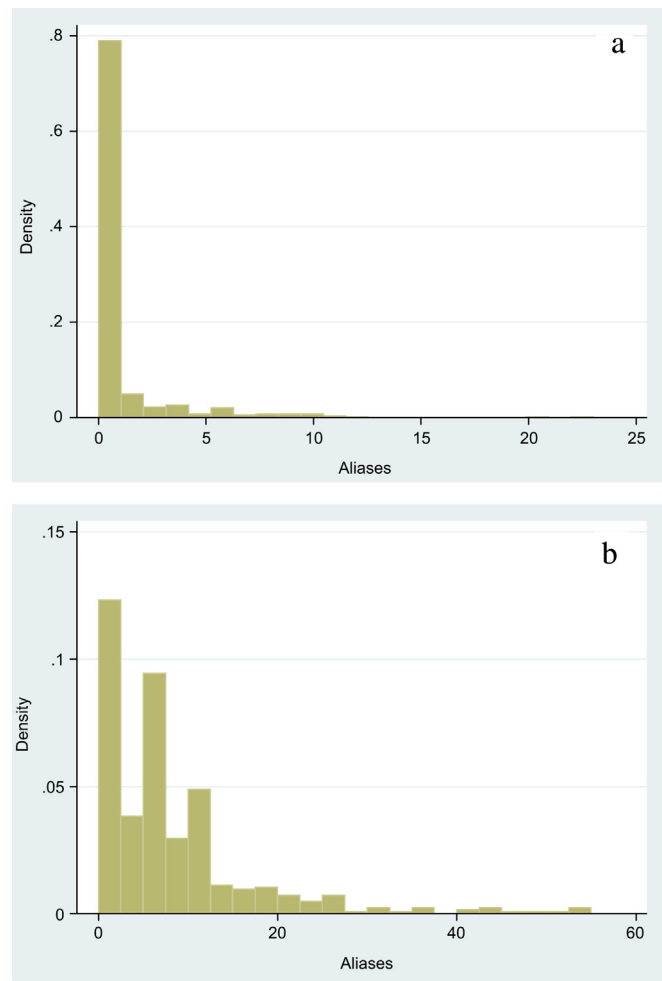


Fig. 1. a. Histogram of aliases for random sample, b: Histogram of aliases for habitual sample.

accumulate arrests). In the habitual sample (shown in Table 2), aliases is the strongest effect and exceeds that of arrest onset. In the random sample of offenders (shown in Table 1), arrest onset is the largest effect ($z = -10.78$).

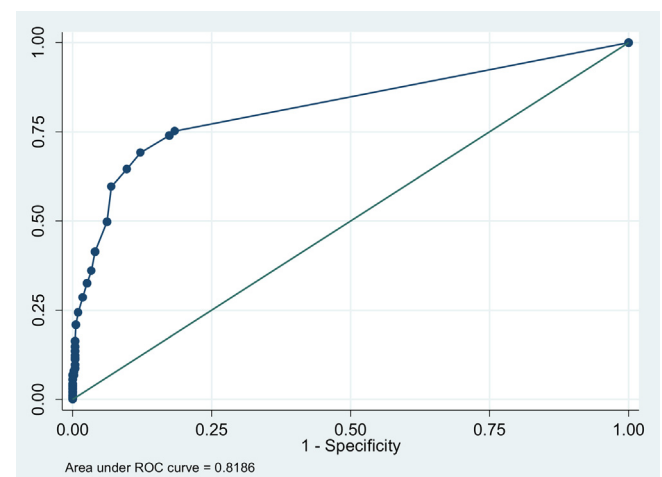


Fig. 2. ROC curve for aliases as classification for habitual criminal offending.

Table 1
Negative binomial regression model for career arrests (random sample).

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>z</i>	95% CI
Aliases	.144	.018	7.96***	.108–.180
Onset	–.082	.007	–10.78***	–.097 to –.067
Sex	–.558	.099	–5.58***	–.753 to –.361
Age	.052	.007	7.35***	.038–.066
Model $\chi^2(4)$	296.06***			
Log likelihood	–1315.9883			
Pseudo R^2	.1011			

*** $p < .0001$.

5. Discussion

The assertion that aliases are associated with criminality and related psychopathology is longstanding, but empirically modest. In psychology and psychiatry, the use of aliases is viewed as part and parcel of a broader tendency toward deception, manipulation, and pathological lying. Indeed, psychopathic individuals are known for these traits^{5,6,8,16} as are those generally low in self-regulation.^{15,30} In criminal justice and forensic practice, the use of aliases is also importantly related to antisocial behavior. The primary reason to use an alias is to complicate law enforcement efforts to ascertain the identity of a person wanted for questioning in the course of a criminal investigation, wanted for an affidavit or failure to appear warrant, or both. Of course, the potential benefit of employing aliases is short-lived once an offender is booked, processed, fingerprinted, and has his or her identity established by their fingerprint record contained in the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS).

In other words, alias usage is a futile ruse because the accurate identification of known offenders is certain if their fingerprints are already on file. Yet, the most serious offenders in the habitual sample were significantly, even dramatically more likely than normative offenders to use them. Indeed, more than four out of five offenders in the random sample had zero aliases on their record. In contrast, habitual offenders averaged nearly eight aliases. This suggests that alias usage despite its apparently rational motivation is more reflective of a broader tendency toward noncompliance and deception during interpersonal exchanges. Moreover, this deficit serves to further disadvantage offenders who use aliases because lying to law enforcement frequently produces additional criminal charges upon arrest, such as criminal impersonation, obstructing police, interference with official acts, and others. Another reason why habitual criminals may be more likely to use an alias is that habitual criminals are more likely to possess psychopathic tendencies that include sensation seeking and thrill seeking,^{31,32} which the use of an alias facilitates by allowing greater sense of power or increasing charm during exploitive encounters.

There is additional practical value to the current study findings. Criminal justice practitioners must often make discretionary decisions based on relatively little clinical information other than a criminal rap sheet. In addition to the arrests, convictions, and correctional placements that appear on NCIC records, there are also

personal identifiers including aliases. The current findings suggest that offenders with extensive and varied alias history are disproportionately likely to be more chronic offenders. Habitual offenders average nearly nine times more aliases on their record than randomly selected arrestees. In this record, aliases are a useful, readily available indicator of serious criminality.

Of course, there are limitations to data based on raw criminal records. The contextual nature of the alias usage during the course of offender's criminal careers was unknown due to limited access to arrest records from agencies outside the jurisdiction where data collection occurred. Such data could provide context to examine the circumstances that are associated with variation in employing aliases. In other words, more refined data could shed light on the relationships between aliases that reflect genuine deception and aliases that reflect data collection error, such as transposing letters of a defendant's name. In addition, the current data lacked measures of psychopathy and Antisocial Personality Disorder that would allow an empirical examination of their associations with aliases and criminal careers.^{33,34} Finally, future research should explore the relationship between aliases and other important correlates of criminal careers, such as sex/gender. For instance, we performed some exploratory *t*-tests which showed that in the random sample, males had significantly more aliases than females ($M = 1.08$ aliases for males and $M = .33$ aliases for females, $t = 3.07$, $p < .01$). However, in the habitual sample, there were not significant differences but women averaged more than two aliases more than their male habitual peers ($M = 9.53$ aliases for females and $M = 7.49$ aliases for males, $t = -1.57$, $p = .12$). Additional samples and studies are needed to further examine this relationship.

6. Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study is among the first to systematically assess the relationships between the use of an alias and habitual criminality. Study findings support the main hypothesis of the study that the overlap between the use of an alias and high rate chronic offending is substantial. Results suggest the tantalizing possibility that use of an alias can potentially be used as a simple screening tool for career criminality. Future research can capitalize on these findings and further investigate the utility of the use of an alias as a “gateway” to a full range of antisocial behavior. For example, it would be useful to know if the use of an alias by children and adolescents serves as a marker for future habitual offending. What is not clear is whether the use of an alias is a byproduct of a rigorous and robust offending lifestyle or is an expression of a trait that is formed early in the life-course.

Ethical approval

Not required.

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Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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Table 2
Negative binomial regression model for career arrests (habitual sample).

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>z</i>	95% CI
Aliases	.016	.002	7.59***	.012–.019
Onset	–.016	.003	–4.42**	–.022 to –.008
Sex	–.212	.059	–3.59***	–.327 to –.096
Age	.007	.002	3.58***	.003–.011
Model $\chi^2(4)$	108.73***			
Log likelihood	–2254.4115			
Pseudo R^2	.0235			

*** $p < .0001$.

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